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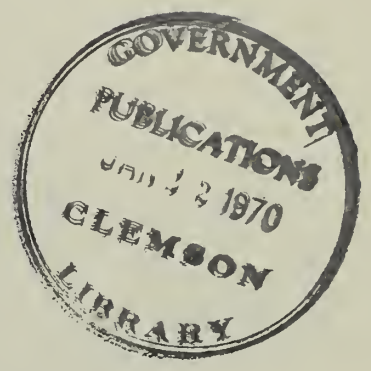
A Master Plan for

CHALMETTE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Louisiana



1969

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service

THIS REPORT

Six miles east of New Orleans, on a wide plain once noted for its wealthy cane plantations, lies a remnant of Chalmette Plantation. On January 8, 1815, fighting there behind makeshift mud ramparts, Andrew Jackson and a motley American army of regulars, militia, volunteers, and pirates repulsed a larger British force in the last major action of the War of 1812.

The scene on Chalmette Plain is far different today from what it was early in the last century. Industry and subdivisions have replaced the elegant plantations. The great cypress swamp that bordered the plain on the north and channeled the British attack into Jackson's line has largely disappeared. The mighty Mississippi itself has claimed about a third of the original battlefield, including the site of Jackson's headquarters, while a railroad and a highway have wiped out a sizable stretch of the American position of the left. Of the original ground over which the battle was fought, Chalmette National Historical Park now embraces only 141 acres, less than a fifteenth of the whole. But that acreage was the scene of Pakenham's determined assault against Jackson's line, by far the most important fighting between the two armies. Small though the tract is, it is our most tangible link with the Battle of New Orleans and an age far removed in time and spirit from our own. How the park here today can best contribute to an understanding of that episode, its causes, its setting, and its significance, is the subject of the following report, which summarizes the park's master plan.

Some of the proposals advanced below—notably those calling for a new visitor center and a new trail and road system—may seem a considerable retreat from past practice. Although our interpretive goals remain the same, at the park, new study has found a need for reordering the way we go about accomplishing those goals. One of the main problems, from an interpretive point of view, is the presence of cars in the heart of the battlefield. The redevelopment outlined here is based to a great extent on a keener awareness of how a small park can be made accessible to the public without at the same time intruding on historic ground. Roads, we have learned, may not advance interpretation; they may, in fact, make the best kind of interpretation more difficult.

Skillful landscaping can also do much to minimize harsh surroundings and help establish an atmosphere in which effective interpretation can take place. Screen plantings can mask factory scenes, road alignments can avoid unhappy vistas, a small cypress swamp can be created along the northern edge of the park to represent the much greater swamp which bounded the battlefield in historical times.

A sense of interpretive purpose, then, underlies much of the following plan. The proposals discussed below will not be accomplished all at once, perhaps not even soon. But they do constitute a unified set of guidelines through which a grand design for the park can eventually be realized—by installments and over a period of time, if need be.

A reconstructed section of the mud ramparts which Jackson's army fought behind. The shallow depression in front is the remains of the old Rodriquez Canal.

Artillery peer over a lower stretch of the ramparts. When a new visitor center is built near the park entrance, the Beauregard House (left) will be partially refurnished.

cypress swamp
American
American Line
Pakenham fell
British
main attack
present park boundary
British artillery
Rodriguez Canal
Highlanders
Macarty Plantation
Jackson's headquarters
canal
British Reserves
British artillery
Chalmette Plantation
left column
river today
levee
Mississippi River
river in 1815
N

JANUARY 8, 1815

The New Orleans Campaign began as the southern thrust of the triple offensive which the British aimed at the United States in mid-1814. In late November a British armada sailed from Jamaica. Its 50 ships bristled with a thousand guns and its transports carried several thousand troops, many newly arrived from Europe, others veterans of the ill-fated assault on Baltimore earlier in the fall. By December 12 the whole fleet had assembled off the Gulf coast, 50 miles from New Orleans.

Andrew Jackson, meanwhile, had arrived in the city and begun work on its defense. He posted gunboats at the entrance to Lakes Borgne and Pontchartrain, and set watches along the water approaches; the rest of his troops were held in reserve in New Orleans.

The first clash came on December 14 on Lake Borgne between the American gunboats and a British barge flotilla, much superior in numbers. The British rout cleared the lakes of resistance and opened the way through the bayous to high ground along the Mississippi over which they could march on the city.

By December 23d the British had pushed through the unguarded bayous to the Villere Plantation, on the Mississippi, 9 miles below New Orleans. The move caught the Americans by surprise, but Jackson lost no time in responding to what was a precarious situation: he decided to attack the British that night, before they were rested. In the evening dusk Jackson launched his attack. The schooner *Carolina* opened the fighting by slipping in close to shore and throwing a fierce broadside into the British camp. Then Jackson's division advanced on the enemy's front, supported by artillery, while Tennessee militia under John Coffee attacked the British right flank. Reinforcements finally stabilized the British line and drove the Americans off, but not before Jackson had achieved his goal of disrupting the British advance. Except for Jackson's bold move they could have marched into the city.

Jackson now retired behind the Rodriguez Canal, a natural defensive barrier across the most direct and the only dry route into the city. By building up the mud walls and anchoring the line in a cypress swamp, Jackson's army made it far stronger. As the days passed, the Americans strengthened it further with artillery and militia.

On December 28, the British commander, Sir Edward Pakenham, made his first test of that barrier. A strong reconnaissance probed both ends of the American line but were turned back. An artillery duel a few days later wrought more destruction, in lives as well as to the respective breastworks.

In the lull that followed, both sides strengthened themselves. Some 2,000 militia joined Jackson's army, and New Orleans was combed for supplies and arms. Two regiments reinforced Pakenham, and a sizable part of his

An engraving of the January 8th battle by Hyacinthe Laclotte, an engineer in Jackson's army. The American line reaches from the lower left to the cypress swamp in the distance. In the foreground, a British column assails the American flank, while in the center, Pakenham's troops mass for the main attack.

army prepared to cross the river and assault the small American detachment there simultaneously with the main attack. Jackson now had about 4,000 men to face Pakenham's 5,400.

Preparations, though, had not gone well for the British commander. A mishap in the freshly-dug canal across the Villere Plantation slowed the transfer of boats from the bayous to the river. Thus during the main battle they were not able to enfilade Jackson's line. Nor did the assault force start well. One column was to hit the America left, near the cypress swamp; the other was to attack the American right, near the river bank. Unfortunately for the British cause, the lead regiment of the right column failed to pick up the ladders and cane bundles needed to cross the deepened canal and scale the mud barricade. The attack, however, was too far along to turn back.

At daybreak on January 8th a rocket marked the battle's start. The British right column started forward and quickly came under fierce American artillery fire. Shot and grape tore through ranks, leaving gaps, but without halting the advance. As the column closed to musket range, the defenders loosed a "constant rolling fire, whose tremendous noise resembled rattling peals of thunder." The British fought bravely, but the weight of the American fire broke their charge and cut down Pakenham and many junior officers. From the British left, a regiment of Highlanders crossed the field to help, but they too caught a galling fire and were thrown back with great losses.

The column on the left came closer to succeeding. They reached the American lines and even engaged in hand-to-hand fighting before the massed fire of muskets and artillery drove them off. Two hours after it started, fighting came to a halt along the plain. Although the British routed the American force on the right bank, they could not follow up their success and soon had to pull back.

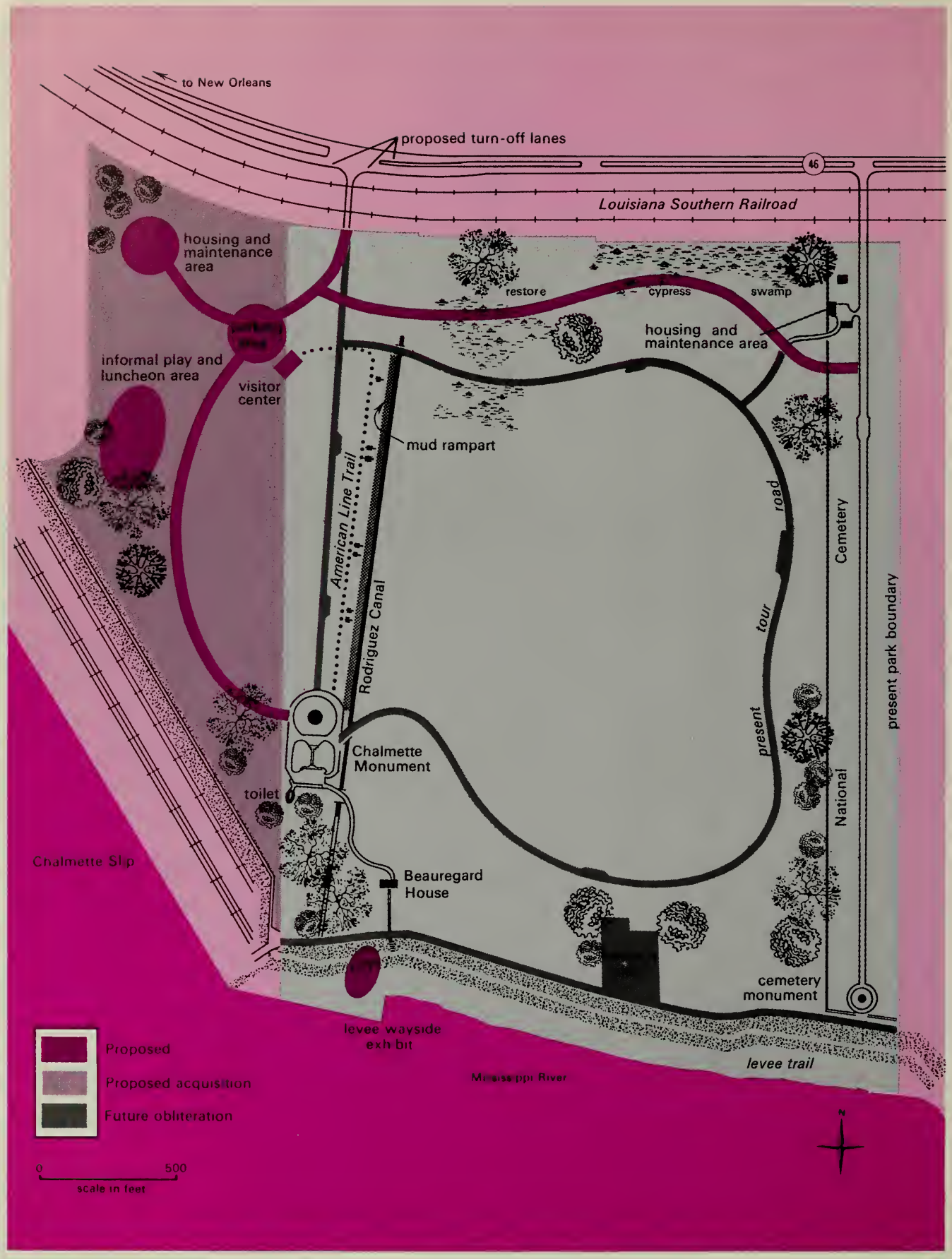
Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of the battle was the casualties. The British lost more than 2,000 men, killed, wounded, and missing, while Jackson had only 7 men killed and 6 wounded.

Politically as well as militarily, Jackson's victory was important to the troubled young Republic. It saved New Orleans from certain conquest, thereby cementing the American hold on the lower Mississippi. It boosted a sagging national morale and contributed to a sense of unity in the country. It elevated Jackson in the eyes of his countrymen and clearly put him on the road to the Presidency. Although the battle was fought after the Treaty of Ghent was signed, that fact was not known in America until weeks later, and the signing thus had no influence on the fighting. Historians credit the victory with hastening Congressional ratification of the treaty.

Screen planting can greatly improve overbearing industrial scenes such as this.

OBJECTIVES FOR THE PARK

- To minimize external distractions through screen planting, good siting and design of the new interpretive center, and a cooperative program of environmental control with local industry and government.
- To eliminate eventually all intrusions within the park, mainly the present tour road, the St. Bernard Parish sewage treatment plant, powerlines, and the service road along the levee.
- To secure enough land between Chalmette Slip and the western boundary to permit the proper development of new interpretive facilities, a new stretch of park road, and ample parking and to buffer the park against the visual intrusion of current industrial development.
- To build a new interpretive center near the park entrance, where the principal park story will be told, and to provide facilities at the Beauregard House and on the levee where secondary themes can be presented.
- To present an active interpretive program about the Battle of New Orleans and related topics for visitors of all ages and interests.
- To begin a program of reciprocal loans with appropriate institutions and historical societies so that artifiacts and other objects associated with the Battle of New Orleans can be displayed from time to time.


to New Orleans
proposed turn-off lanes
46
Louisiana Southern Railroad
housing and maintenance area
restore
cypress
swamp
housing and maintenance area
informal play and luncheon area
visitor center
mud rampart
American Line Trail
Rodriguez Canal
road
tour
present
Cemetery
present park boundary
National
Chalmette Monument
toilet
Chalmette Slip
Beauregard House
cemetery monument
levee wayside exhibit
levee trail
Mississippi River
Proposed
Proposed acquisition
Future obliteration
0
500
scale in feet
N

THE PARK'S GOOD NEIGHBOR
The present park owes much to the generosity of the Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical Corporation. Fulfilling an earlier pledge, the company in 1965 donated to the Federal Government a 66-acre tract in the center of the battlefield. This gift assured the integrity of the park and allowed the Park Service to move ahead with plans to restore the historical scene and build needed facilities for visitors.

A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

The Surroundings

Because so little of the historical battlefield lies within the park's boundary, it is important to deal well with what remains. The park now faces two critical but related problems: how to adapt vital physical facilities to the nature of the park and to its interpretive goals, and how to minimize a variety of unfortunate visual distractions from the park's industrial neighbors. The general solution adopted in this plan is to expand the boundaries to the west so that an entirely new system of visitor facilities—better fitted to interpretive requirements than those in use now—can be installed.

Both of the preceding problems can be resolved if the triangle of land lying between Chalmette Slip and the western boundary is acquired. This tract would provide both an adequate buffer against future industrial development of that side of the park and room for the interpretive facilities described below, as well as parking, future housing, a maintenance building, and an informal luncheon and play area.

Lesser intrusions and distractions can be dealt with in several ways. Over the long term, the sewage plant, which stands on historic ground, should be acquired and eliminated. Until this can be accomplished, probably the only course is to continue to screen the facility by plantings. If the sewage plant is removed, the need for overhead powerlines in the park will disappear, and much traffic will be taken off the service road along the levee. This road should eventually be phased out, but because it is still the Kaiser Corporation's main access to Chalmette Slip, this step would be taken only after the company has found a satisfactory alternative route to the slip. Outside the park, the many industrial scenes to the north and east can be screened from visitors by skillful landscaping along the boundaries. The General Development Plan shows some of the places where this is most needed.

Interpretation

Perhaps the greatest intrusion of all is the 5,600-foot concrete tour road, built through the heart of the battlefield in 1965. Because of past river encroachments and the industrial surroundings, it is impossible to fully recreate the setting of the 1815 battle. But it is our considered judgment that enough of the field should be left intact for visitors to understand easily the flow of the battle. The present tour road serves no great interpretive function. Taking it out would eliminate vehicles from the battlefield, an improvement that will

be all the more urgent after the new visitor center, with its elevated viewing area, is built.

When the loop road and the road leading straight down to the Chalmette Monument are obliterated, an entirely new interpretive route will be laid out for visitors. The entrance road will then swing behind the proposed visitor center and around to the monument, taking traffic away from the historic scene and out of the view of people in the second-floor assembly room. A new drive across the northern edge of the park will give access to the National Cemetery. It will be built to the minimum practical width and suitably screened from view.

Live talks and audiovisual programs presented in the assembly room can easily be keyed to the prospect out over the battlefield. Viewers will be able to see markers, perhaps battle flags and artillery pieces, on important sites—the route of the main British assault, for example, and the place where Pakenham fell. With the tour road out, the general scene should be much more plausible than now.

On the battlefield, visitors will find several features worth investigating on foot:

American Line—From the interpretive center a trail will lead along a stretch of mud ramparts which resembles the barricade behind which Jackson and his men fought in 1815. State and regimental flags could mark troop positions and artillery pieces' battery locations. At intervals signs and taped messages will describe the course of the battle and interesting sidelights.

Beauregard House—From the Chalmette Monument, the great shaft built between 1855 and 1908 to memorialize the battle, a path will lead to the post-battle Beauregard House, now the park's visitor center. When the house is no longer needed for this function, its first floor will be refurnished and displayed as a typical plantation great house of the period. The most important of the park's secondary themes—plantation life during the first half of the 19th century—will be presented here.

The River Levee—Beyond the Beauregard House lies the levee, one of the few places in the vicinity from which one can get a clear view of the passing river traffic. Inconspicuous benches will offer foot-weary visitors a place to rest, and exhibits will tell about the river, past and present, its history and natural history. Many visitors will find the levee one of the more interesting stops on their tour.

The National Cemetery is fairly popular with visitors, and brief accounts of its origin, purpose, and history will be presented on–site. It can be reached on foot or by car.

Administration

The park master plan also provides for several managerial improvements, among them increased staffing to man and maintain new interpretive facilities,

more employee housing within the park, and the gradual adoption of concurrent jurisdiction (with local authorities) over all lands. There is a need also for an active museum program which brings to the park objects and artifacts that illustrate important themes. But for this to succeed, those organizations and groups which have such items must be willing to lend or donate them to the Park Service.

CHRONOLOGY: THE PRESERVATION OF CHALMETTE BATTLEFIELD

1840—Jackson returns to New Orleans and visits the battlefield.
1857—Louisiana legislature resolves to acquire 13 acres on the battlefield and appropriates $15,000 to erect a monument.
1864—The War Department establishes the National Cemetery for the Civil War dead.
1888—Louisiana cedes part of its park lands to U.S. Government.
1894—Chalmette Monument and grounds placed under the care of the Daughters of 1776-1812 by the State legislature.
1902—State agrees to take back the monument, complete it, and return it to the Daughters.
1907—Congress appropriated $25,000 to complete the monument.
1909—The completed Monument is dedicated and returned to the Daughters.
1927—Daughters suggest that the monument be returned to U.S. Government and made a National Park.
1929—War Department takes over the monument and grounds.
1933—The park and National Cemetery transferred to Department of the Interior.
1939—Congress establishes Chalmette National Historical Park.
1950—Louisiana donates 36 acres and the Beauregard House to the National Park Service.
1960—Kaiser Aluminum Corporation donates the first of several tracts totaling 66 acres to the park.
1964—Reconstruction of the American Line.
1965—Celebration of the 150th anniversary of the battle.

The Department of the Interior—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—has a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.

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